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Day By Day

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English and Philosophy
Murray State University
Murray, KY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by Casey Springer
May 2018

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To Steve: You have been more than my other half through this process. Thank you for every draft read and every load of laundry folded, so I could fulfill my dreams. I truly could not have done this without you. Thank you.

Kids: Never give up.

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Introduction

The hardest thing in the world to is to write straight honest prose on human beings. First, you have to know the subject; then you have to know how to write. Both take a lifetime to learn...

Ernest Hemingway

I couldn't have been more than five years old when I asked for my first book. While at the grocery store, I spied a rack of magazines. My favorite and most coveted was a copy of *Highlights* magazine that gave children a variety of ways to be both entertained and educated. I begged for it, and unlike on most occasions, I got what I wanted. I took it home proud that I had something to read even if it wasn't a book. I memorized every *Find the Difference* and *Find the Hidden Objects* and tried to develop my jokes to mail to them in hopes of having my name published with them. I read as much as my brain could at that young age.

My school friendships were shaped by reading and the hunt for new and interesting reads, including the *Sweet Dream* series. They were a collection of books contracted with different writers. I, of course, never realized the lovely stories had been farmed out, but a sixth-grade group of girls loved them and found any book trading store to get the next on the list. As an adult, I acquired copies lost in a move and reverted to the feelings of a young teenager and cried all over again. *P.S. I Love You* by Barbara Conklin is a story of a teenage girl of divorced parents (which I was) being forced to leave her hometown for the summer because her mother found a new job. The girl meets boy plot

developed as Paul was diagnosed with cancer during a summer stay. Mariah finds the love she has been reading about in the novels hidden in the bottom of her closet. He dies at the end. While not a terribly well-written book or plot, it entertained a group of girls and started many discussions.

I read the same literature in school that most people did, but I was often left frustrated by a teacher deciding to quit teaching the book in the middle (*The Hobbit*) or just not teaching it well (*Romeo and Juliet*). Because of that, English throughout much of my school career was frustrating and something I didn't feel successful at. We were challenged our eighth-grade year to write a creative piece. My best friend and I struggled because we hadn't ever been given any writing assignment we could be creative with. I was excited about the challenge until I got mine back with all the negative comments. I used dialect, and she docked my grade.

I did not enjoy freshman or sophomore English, but my junior year I had an American literature class taught by a teacher new to our school. We had regular vocabulary lists and learned to analyze stories and poetry. She taught us how important it was to view the piece of writing through the eyes of history and the context of the culture. She remains one of my favorite teachers; she retired and began publishing her work.

When I graduated from high school, my parents were not willing to help me with college and sabotaged my many efforts to do so. I used the cash I received for graduation and registered for two classes, English 101 and Self Defense. (I can defend myself in a dark parking garage, but cannot recount anything I learned in English 101.) The class was taught by a woman who worked full time for Monsanto and hadn't ever taught classes.

After stumbling through some pretty bad years in life, and after I picked up what was left of my shredded body and intellect, I went back and received an Associate of Arts. I soaked in everything I could in English and literature. I learned peer editing and basic writing skills in those early classes. (One student did not enjoy the group editing process and growled at the professor anytime she received a bad review.) I took several classes that pushed me to do more reading and writing. I shared with a few of my friends that I enjoyed the English world and considered finishing my degree in English and writing or teaching it. They all told me that it was a terrible idea, and there were better options, but I continued reading and writing, small, terrible things—none of which I was able to keep. (Divorcing an idiot will cause you to lose things.)

In a final class project for English Studies with Sarah Appleton we were given an opportunity to develop a case study of a piece of writing. A poor college student, I picked up Walls' book for five dollars at a used book store. Her first line, "I was sitting in a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening. When I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through the dumpster," made me want to write about my own story (Walls 3).

I remember Dale Ray Phillips asking me as I sat in the front row of his 214 Intro to Creative Writing about my first sentence of my first ever short story. I couldn't remember. He responded that it wasn't good if I couldn't remember it. That question developed a habit in me of memorizing lines of books and going to book stores and reading first lines. Reading Walls' memoir, I could hear my own story in that first sentence.

“I Can’t” has pieces of my personal story woven into it. Living with a mother with severe mental depression gave me immeasurable things to write about; however, Dale Ray told me that yes, maybe that had happened in my life, but I hadn’t written it well enough to make him believe it. Jeanette Walls tells her story of being the child of two eccentric parents who robbed their four children of a stable existence but provided excitement and entertainment for them.

While the stories in the book show the parents’ inability to provide a safe existence for the children, it never came across as a hate-filled book of condemnation. Walls begins the book with her being three years old and cooking hotdogs on the stove as her dress catches fire. Reading this book was like sitting on the edge of the couch waiting for the next installment of the adventures of Dad. Her parents removed her from the hospital and loaded her into the back of the car with only the possessions that would fit in the trunk and they skipped town. Walls made it sound like an adventure, not a child abuse case.

I had to figure out how to write my own story. I wanted the reader to know how it felt standing in a bathroom and thinking if I hid behind the furnace she couldn’t shoot through it. I wanted the reader to know that when she told me to stay at the neighbor’s house all day because she didn’t trust herself that I wondered what she would do to herself while I was gone. The story needs to be written that when I was in the hospital after having a tumor removed from my neck, my mom and my step-dad argued over who got to eat my food. I told them to leave. I spent the night alone in the hospital as a kid, and they were over an hour away.

My daughter suffered a catastrophic illness in 2010 that left an otherwise completely healthy child paralyzed and unable to care for herself in any way. She was diagnosed with Transverse Myelitis, and that sent us on what is now a more than seven-year journey in which she has recovered as much as she ever will. She is an honor roll student competing in speech, archery, and other things—on wheels. As we trudged through the early days of her illness, people wanted information, and the exhaustion of that pushed me to publish a blog. I could share things that I could not say face to face. It was the worst of life. I seldom left her side and never took food off her plate.

People from different areas of life urged me to write a book about challenges and life with a sick child. I was a cheerleader for other families going through the same thing and resource gatherer out of necessity, but I always found someone new to share things with. The next step seemed to be to sit down and write a book. I downloaded the Scrivener program, mapped out the chapters, and started writing. It became clear to me that the stories I wanted to tell deserved better skills than what I had.

I had a compulsion to write my own history, but I wasn't a good writer. I was a good blogger. I learned to tell the difference between a one-thousand-word narrative about the day versus a story arc that entertained. While both types of reading and writing served a purpose in my life, I wanted my words between a cover and on a shelf, not just archived on Blogger until it floats away into the digital abyss of MySpace and AOL.

I researched writing programs and found Murray State's MFA program. I printed off the requirements for the program and gazed at them as if it were a unicorn staring back at me. I knew I did not have the skills to get accepted, so I filed it in my desk drawer with my journals for a year. But I kept writing. I journaled, blogged, wrote articles for our

medical community, and kept reading. I started writing narratives and blurbs about people I would watch in airports and at Walmart and church.

I began gathering fiction craft books and expanded my genre reading and pulled the MFA application out of my drawer and devised a plan for my application. My full circle moment came when I was sitting at lunch after a difficult day of doctor's appointments with my daughter at Johns Hopkins. I received an email from Ann Neelon congratulating me on my acceptance to the program.

Hemingway said it best when he said that it took a lifetime to get good at writing and learning people. Watching the evolution of my work shows that editing never stops. My mentor through this process, Julia Watts, recommended a text for our first workshop. *Steering the Craft* has been a book that I have turned to many times. Julia taught that when writing just sucks and you can't push the character to do what you need him to do, then you step back and review the story. Writing can often feel that you are just on the cusp of an idea, and you are waiting for someone to appear and tell you the secret to your plot. There is no time or waiting for the correct sentence to float down and land on your screen. Her workshops have given me the ability to step away from the main story and write background which has often spurred me on to more words. I have also written less on my computer and more with pen and paper.

For instance, Alan, in my story "Life After Death," fights with his own faith and what people expect of him. I wrote a narrative using just his voice and character about what his life trajectory meant to him and the feelings that went with it. It took me from a place of a whiny, sad, preachy, sob story to someone who had an identity crisis and didn't choose the smartest way out. Having shared with Julia that I needed to learn how to "take

care of the sentences and they'll take care of you," she suggested I read Virginia Woolf. Tragically, I had completed two degrees and never had been exposed to Virginia Woolf. We chose *Mrs. Dalloway*, which sent me down a path of reading and writing a paper about her life and mental illness for a literature class. *Mrs. Dalloway* has the beautiful first line "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (Woolf 3).

A sentence read carefully gives many answers but also asks questions. This sentence gives us both. Why would she need to say she was going to buy the flowers herself? Why did she need to clarify that she would buy the flowers? Woolf didn't have a good relationship with her maid, and this was a jab at that; she would just do it herself. A statement that is fully female in translation.

While many people may find the sentence flat, I ripped it apart and tried to recreate it for myself. She's the writer I wish I were, saying so much in so few words. This is my main goal as a writer. I want to write sentences loaded with information that affect emotions in ways nothing else can. Woolf enjoyed maiming her characters and allowing them to feel the different struggles. Many claim she used her abusive childhood as a template for her writing.

Toni Morrison is an artist with sentence structure: "He fell for an eighteen-year-old-girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going" (3). *Jazz* begins with a beautifully crafted sentence, and Morrison talks about its difficult construction in her foreword: "My effort to enter that world was constantly being frustrated. I couldn't locate the voice, or position the eye. The story opened with the betrayed wife intent on killing her rival" (xviii).

It encouraged me to see that Toni Morrison, a Nobel Prize winner, struggled to find a voice in which she could launch the story of a man and a woman who dance their way into New York City. I will never be a writer of her level, but to understand that the process of finding a voice or a point of view that tells the story the best way can be maddening. Morrison expects readers to do their job as they read the text. When Morrison allows the readers to develop their own thoughts, we get sentences like “He rented a room from a neighbor who knows the exact cost of her discretion” (Morrison 36).

Morrison could have written a paragraph about how they snuck up the back stairs to use a room they'd rented from a woman whose husband had died, and she needed money to pay her gas bill, and so she looked the other way as they entered the room with blue sheets covered in fuzz balls perfumed with a faint scent of sex. Instead, we get one sentence of three people doing something outside the lines of acceptable moral behavior. The reader knows what's at stake here without Morrison spelling it out.

When I began to search for pieces to include in this thesis, I wanted to split the writing by point of view and genre. The pieces I had written over the past cycles didn't feel deep enough. Simply put, I approached this thesis process asking “if I never get to write anything, ever again, what stories do I want to include?” “I'm Still Alive” began with the goal of telling a story of someone with a spinal cord injury, similar to my daughter's story.

The question was how do I show Lindsey becoming paralyzed? This proved difficult to write because of my own history. I started with two friends on a Friday night, and in the original story, it began with them being removed from the car. I wrote several

different versions of the wreck happening and the moments of them being cut out of the car and the trip to the hospital complete with police and drug tests. I could not develop the plot past that point. Having begun the story in the middle left me with few places to explore and allowing the characters to grow or fail. I trashed it and started over. When choosing a different path, it was easy to use the mantra of write what you know with a background of teenage girls. I was one, and I have one.

This moment proved easy to relate to and think about when, as a teenager, the weekend goal was to plan your hairstyle, outfit, and friends. Friends often changed, but the goal was always the same, look cute and be noticed. Parents proved strict, but there was always one mom who would cover for everyone.

That's where I started. I wrote several drafts before I was able to determine whose story it was. The choice for the story to be about the girls and a car accident seemed too after-school special and wasn't where I wanted the focus to be. I wanted it to be about a girl who had a spinal cord injury and was forced to learn how to live a new life. The involvement with Sean came later, and this is a piece I plan to develop into a longer story or young adult novel. My daughter was a voice throughout the piece. This is her life, and she is an expert on what someone would have forced her to do in life.

While two stories came from places I knew about, the last, "Life After Death," came from a place of flipping through the channels one night and stopping on a local church channel. The idea of a Pastor taking the time to watch himself and critique his skills sparked something, but I didn't know what to do with it. Our community had had a few deaths, and one was a man who had lost his wife, and we watched him try to find his place after her death. The loss of self and waking up in her house every day with fancy

towels and the smell of her perfume, that's where the worlds collided. The decision to make him drink was not something I wanted to come off as cheap or forced. The church language was easy to use and the two versions of himself evolved as I pushed him between two worlds. Alan was initially someone I wanted people to hate and point at as a person people use as an excuse to hate the local church. However, when the story was workshopped the consensus was that they felt sorry for him, and they felt like he was a good guy. I had not planned for that, and so in later drafts I tried to humanize him a bit more and forced him into a life that he'd never had to live for himself.

These stories represent a small corner of my world and the people who live around me. It is a hard thing to know which stories to tell and which ones to hide, and in typing that it makes me think that those are the ones to write, the hidden ones. Therein lies the struggle of what is allowable to write. How far do we open the closet door where the skeletons are stored? Do we write the true words and let all else be damned? That is a struggle that I have not solved at this point in my writing. The fear is that my kids will someday want to write and have similar ideas and air their grievances for all the world to read.

I Can't

When I tell people that mom slept with a .45 revolver under her pillow, they ask me why she was afraid.

She never said.

But she made me afraid of her.

They were fighting again. This time it was her husband, my stepdad, Jeff, and she was pissed because he came home late from a business trip. She was convinced that he'd given her a disease and that everyone around her would catch it unless they washed with a special, pink soap. She pushed me into the bathroom and turned on the shower and yelled at me to take off my clothes and get in.

"No, Mom. This is in your head, and it doesn't have anything to do with me." I pulled away from her and wedged myself into the corner of the bathroom.

"Crystal, just get in the shower and everything will be fine. Now. I thought he loved us, but he's brought this dirty thing home, and I have to get rid of it."

She walked out of the bathroom, and I slammed and locked the door behind her. I left the water running to drown out the sound of her voice and her banging on the door. I stayed there with the bottle of soap in my hands in the corner of the bathroom I thought her gun couldn't reach, until I got brave enough to sneak out.

She didn't talk about it the next morning but got her revenge while I was at school.

I tossed my biology book on the kitchen table and went to change clothes in my room but had to force my door open and push piles of what I realized were my clothes out of the way. The floor was littered with all my stuff. Dresser drawers were empty and turned upside down on the mountain of my scattered clothes. Hangers hung empty off the walk-in closet rod, and my sheets and blankets piled in a corner. My bookshelves had been dumped over, including the basket of roses I had dried from Grandma's funeral.

"Mom, what happened?"

"I know you've been drinking and smoking, and I planned to find it and throw it out."

"More like find it and use it. I'm not hiding anything," I said quietly, as she chugged her sweet tea.

"We'll see. Start cleaning this up and don't say hell."

"Mom you have to clean this up. You've lost your mind, and you've destroyed my room. Why would you do this to me?"

"You were told to do something last night, and you ignored me. Start cleaning." She turned and walked out of my room. I turned to see projects that I had worked on throughout my high school career for my art show ruined and ripped.

"Mom, this isn't my fault. You've trashed my books, and ruined my artwork for my Senior show. I'm leaving." I went to stay at a friend's house who was used to me just dropping in when things got bad at my house. I was their favorite child, because I was the only one who helped clean the house.

When I walked in the back door from school the next day. Mom was sitting on the couch watching Oprah, with a Marlboro in her left hand and a pen in her right as she worked the daily crossword

“Your room’s clean, and you’re welcome.” I walked down the hallway wishing for another door, so I could have just kept walking out and away from that house forever. It was never discussed again.

*

Life with Mom had become like living in a house with holes in the floors that you couldn't see, and there was no hint when the area you walked across would just drop away, and you'd fall into her personal hell of paranoia and fear. We lived between the gaps of happiness and chaos. There were no monogrammed shirts or mommy-daughter dates, but she could cook. Her fried chicken gave Crisco its name. She would pull it from the hot cast iron skillet and place it on a plate covered with paper towels, the outside crispy and the inside juicy.

“Crystal, the key is Crisco. The grease should be hot and clean and lots of it. Don’t skimp and never mix cooked and uncooked chicken in the skillet. It makes it gummy, and it’ll burn your chicken.” The women in her family were known for being excellent cooks. Mom made fried chicken and pies. Grandma made dumplings and fried green tomatoes. Her sister made cookies and cakes. Times in the kitchen seemed normal and happy, and her biscuits and gravy made life better.

After a peaceful couple of weeks, we were driving home from my doctor appointment, and singing along to the country music channel, when she said the highway department wasn’t doing their job to protect drivers on the other side of the road.

“It’s really sad that they don’t separate traffic more. If a driver wasn’t paying attention, they could hurt someone.”

“Mom, I’m sure it’s fine. People know how to drive and know to pay attention.”

“That’s because you’ve never seen or been in a bad wreck. Did I tell you about the time I hit a cow in my dad’s truck when I was fourteen? I was pulling his horse trailer.”

“Did it kill the cow?” I asked, picking at my nails, trying to avoid the curl of smoke from her cigarette.

“Ground beef everywhere,” she said with a chuckle.

We missed her warning signs. She rambled about things that never mattered and hadn’t ever been a caring person, unless she was feeding her dog from her plate. The concern for people on the other side of the road seemed misplaced when she didn’t care for the people on the other side of our street.

On her forty-fifth birthday, she drove towards Chicago and crossed the median. She didn’t account for the sloping of the ground and the days of rain that made the ground soft and muddy. Her car spun facing the opposite direction, losing a tire that hit another car, causing them to wreck. She didn’t have a scratch on her. The ambulance transported her anyway, because she was disoriented, and they suspected drug use. The police called Jeff at work, and we drove to the hospital two hours from home.

“Your wife needs to be admitted for long-term mental health evaluations, but she is refusing to stay for treatment, but as her husband, you can sign, and we will admit her.”

“Does she know that? That she can leave on her own?”

“Yes, she’s been through this before. She has a pretty lengthy history of this type of behavior as I’m sure you’re aware.”

“If I do that, she’ll hate me forever. What if she tries to kill herself while she’s in here? I’ll never be able to live with myself.”

“Sir, she’s sick, and she needs your help, and you have the power and resources to help her.” He handed Jeff a clipboard full of paperwork.

“I can’t do that to her. She’ll hate me. I’ll take her home and get her into therapy.”

“Outpatient therapy is not going to help her sir; she needs intense treatment, where she can be prescribed something for the manic phase she is in right now. We can only hold her for seventy-two hours, and that is not going to give her what she needs; this is going to keep happening until she receives treatment like counseling and medication. She needs a person that can monitor her and keep up with her daily life. You are aware this was a suicide attempt and not an accident.”

“Did she tell you that?” He leafed through the pages and looked at me.

"She didn't have to because there were witnesses who had watched her weaving in and out of traffic. They were surprised that she hadn't wrecked sooner. Police had been called for alleged driving under the influence, but they were too late.”

He didn’t sign papers to admit her.

Mom requested discharge papers and changed her clothes and stood by the door waiting to be taken home. Jeff had stood in the corner of the room watching her. She walked over to him and stretched up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek.

"Let's go, guys, I'm hungry." She turned into the hallway looked over her shoulder at us.

"Mom, you need to wait for your paperwork." I followed her out of the room, and as she walked past the nurse's station, she turned to look at the nurses and doctors flipped them off.

"I don't need anything from them. Let's go." As she walked through the automatic doors to the car, we both struggled to catch up to her.

"Diane, you have to go back and in and finish the paperwork and whatever other things they need you to do, come on it won't take long. I'll wait for you."

"Jeff, please don't make me go back in there. They were awful to me. They talked to me like I was a dog and just a trashy woman. They just couldn't understand that I was taking a nice drive and got distracted. It was an accident. Let's just go, please. There are better doctors at home. Can we just go? I'm so hungry."

I looked at Jeff's face and knew he would take her home.

"Mom, why don't we just grab your paperwork and then go. You need to make sure you do everything, so you don't get in trouble."

"Crystal, they are not my boss. I'm a grown woman, and I will do what I want and right now I want to go home."

She hugged Jeff, and as she pulled away, she grabbed the keys from his hand and opened the doors. "I win. Let's go!"

Since she had totaled her car, we all got to ride home together. "I'm so glad to be going home, you guys. I did a stupid thing, but I'm fine now. There are some great restaurants up here, why don't we eat? Crystal, what are you hungry for?"

I sat in the back seat watching her fix her makeup in the mirror, talking so fast I couldn't understand her. She looked over at Jeff and patted his shoulder.

"Jeff, I'm so sorry about the car. I'll call the insurance company tomorrow."

"You do realize you have a court date and the police are involved because you caused an accident. The car has already been towed, and an adjuster will be there to look at it tomorrow. You tried to kill yourself today. I know what you did."

"Oh, did Dr. Ass get to you. They think that because they get to wear their little white coats, they are so smart. He thought he was smart. He had a problem, and I bet he was drunk. Then he had the nerve to ask me if I had been drinking. I told them this was my naturally bubbly personality. I think it was a terrible hospital. They didn't even have cable in my room."

"When we get home, and your daughter isn't in the car we are going to discuss treatment plans for you. They wanted to admit you. Did you know that?"

"I'm fine."

"You need help, and I want to help, but I don't have what you need. Let's get some professional help, and we will do it together."

"Drop it, Jeff. We aren't talking about this."

"Sweetie, it's a good thing. Please let's do this together, and after, we can go on vacation."

"I told you to stop talking." She leaned over against the door. I felt like I was suffocating in the back of the car; her voice became more irritated."

"Crystal, do you like the beach? I don't think I've ever asked you that." He looked at me in the rearview.

“I’m fair skinned, so I burn. Not really.”

“If you two don’t shut up, I’m getting out of this car.” She rubbed her temples and covered her face with her hands.

“Mom, it’s fine. Just find a place to eat. I need to pee anyway. Hey, is there a place that serves lemon meringue pie. You know that’s my favorite.”

“Jeff just pull over. I need to get out. I’m walking.” She tried to open the door, but the automatic locks wouldn’t let her. He hadn’t stopped the car yet; she was hitting the buttons trying to get out.

“Mom. Stop. You can’t open the door,” I yelled and climbed over the seat, grabbing her hands. I landed and straddled her before she could get the door open as Jeff pulled off the side of the road. She slammed me back against the windshield as Jeff opened the door, she knocked me into the floorboard as she jumped out.

“Get her Jeff; she’s going for the road. Get her!”

I crawled out of the car to see her lying face down in the field beside the car. She hadn’t run.

“Mom, come on get up; I’ll help you,” as I crawled over to her.

“Crystal, I need you to get back in the car and leave me alone. My only goal in this life is to get you through high school and then I don’t have to fight to live anymore.”

“Oh my God, do you have to be so dramatic about everything?”

“You don’t understand. Remember when you told me it wasn’t my problem because it was in my head. You’re right, it’s in my head. You need to stay out of it and just be quiet.”

“Jeff, I need to go home.” She looked at him and wiped her nose on the back of her hand.

“How do I know you aren’t going to try out bust out of the car again?”

"Because I'm telling you that I won't." She walked back to the car and climbed into the backseat and laid down, using my coat as a pillow.

We didn't get pie, but instead sandwiches from the nearest gas station, and we rode home in the quiet with no talking and no noise other than the sound of the bump of the interstate.

*

Mom was on her best behavior with Jeff. Dinner was on the table each night when he came home. She wasn’t spending money that he could track down. Mom knew how to manipulate the people around her and when she went to a psychiatrist that Jeff found for her, she wrote him a sixteen-page letter about how he was an idiot with a medical license and should be put in prison for the harm he did to his patients. Mom reminded him that she was a vulnerable person seeking help and instead was referred to a twelve-step program like an alcoholic. She never went back to see him, and he didn't respond to her letter. She wasn’t ever completely normal.

I spent less time at home, so that I didn't have to listen to rants about people who had wronged her. Jeff let me borrow his car, since mom had to drive mine after she played bumper cars with hers. He gave me freedom to go and hang out with friends that mom wouldn’t ever have allowed.

I had gone to the movie that night with friends. I felt like a normal teenager until I pulled up in front of the house.

Red lights flashed across the lawn and the front of the house. Jeff walked towards me and said I needed to get back in the car and stay the night at a friend's house.

"Jeff, what happened," I asked as I ran towards the house. "Mom, where are you?"

"Ma'am, you can't go in the house," an officer yelled at me and told Jeff to stop me.

"Jeff, tell me. What did she do?" I yanked my arm loose and ran back to the front door towards the house yelling mom.

"Stop her," I heard the police officer behind me yell.

Two men appeared in front of me like a wall. "Sorry, Miss. We need to take care of a few things before we can leave. Can you stay with your dad?"

"No one is telling me what is going on. What happened?"

"Crystal, let's go to my parents' house for a minute."

"No, just tell me. I'm not a baby. I've seen her do more stuff than you ever will."

"She did it."

"She did what?" He just looked at me.

"I left her home while I went to the store to get things for dinner. She asked me to make steaks tonight. I was only gone thirty minutes."

"I don't understand. What did she do." I couldn't look at him, and it felt like the ground around me was opening to swallow me as his voice made noises in my ears.

"Crystal, she did it. She used her gun. She's in her room on her bed with the dog." He grabbed my arm and tried to hug me.

“You’re wrong. She always just threatens; she doesn’t ever do it. You’re wrong, Jeff. Get away from me and please let me see mom.” I wrestled away from him and ran towards the house to see them bringing the stretcher out. All I could see were the wheels on the stretcher and the feet of the men carrying it, kicking them so they could take her down the steps. And the feet of the man behind him tripping across the threshold.

I'm Still Alive

It's been three weeks since the wreck, and Pearl Jam's "Alive" is stuck in my head. My sister thinks it should be my theme song. I'm 16, relearning to tie my shoes and put my clothes on because I got in a car with my best friend Allie, and two guys. She's dead.

After the football game, Allie said the guys would take us home. Instead, we were along for a beer run.

"Allie, we need to go home. My mom still hates you from the last stunt you pulled," I said, as I slumped down in the seat.

"Lindsey, you are such a snot, don't worry. It'll be fine, and I'll take the blame."

"Again?" I said, as I pulled her hair hanging over the back seat.

"Stop it." She turned around and tried to grab my hands.

"Girl fight," Chris said as he punched the air.

"Idiot," I whispered under my breath.

"Sean, Lindsey is adorable, but she's PMSing. That reminds me can you stop at Walgreens, Chris? You know, for her?" She turned around to glare at me. "Don't pull my hair."

"You are unbelievable, Allie," I said.

"Alright children, simmer down. We need some music," Chris turned out of the parking lot and onto the road.

“I called shotgun, so I get to pick the music.” Allie had to be the boss and the loudest.

“Oh goody. More Nirvana.” I leaned back in the seat as Chris floored it.

“No. How about The Cranberries, I love them. ‘In your head, in your head, Zombie,’” Allie sang at the top of her lungs.

“I actually kind of like them. They aren't fruity, and I love her hair.” I leaned up and pointed at the picture on the CD case in Allie's hands as Chris slammed on the brakes.

“Learn to drive, man; you just slammed my face into your seat,” Sean said as he rubbed his cheek.

“Calm down, man.” Chris tapped his ring on the gear shifter with the music.

“You got seatbelts from the ancient times back here. I'm sure you do a lot of sitting back here—right, Chris?”

“I've never sat in that backseat.” He grinned at Sean in the mirror.

“Hold on everybody,” he said as he slammed on the brakes and turned into the parking lot.

“Sean, get off! You just slammed my head into the window. Chris, you suck at driving.” I rubbed the side of my head.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to fall on you, Lindsey. Our chauffeur doesn't seem to understand the basics of driving. You smell good though.” He leaned over to the other side of the car and ran his hands through his hair.

“Thanks. Hey, Allie, you promised Walgreens and home. Those are the only stops Lindsey wants to make.”

“You’re cute, Lindsey, referring to yourself like that. She’s cute, isn’t she, Sean?”

"Lindsey, if you can stop complaining for like two seconds, we will go to Walgreens. Sorry, Sean. Looks like you are out of luck tonight." Chris said as he thumped his hand on the gear shifter.

“You have great taste in boys, Allie,” I said, as I punched the back of her seat.

“Do you really want to talk about taste in guys? Remember Brandon with the double earrings who never knew you existed?”

“Yeah, he knew I was alive; he borrowed a red pen from me in accounting, and don’t you have a crush on someone?” I grinned and pointed at the back of Chris’ head.

“You two settle your little chick fight, and I’m going to go get something to make this night better.”

*

I don’t remember much after that. I’ve tried, but it’s like a blank screen.

We laughed and played music the guys hated, but I can’t remember when the actual wreck happened. The police officers told Mom that Chris pulled into the path of a car, and they hit the side Allie and I were on. Her lack of seatbelt killed her, but mine paralyzed me. It saved my life—if that's what you call this. Chris only broke his hand, and Sean ended his sports career when his knee was crushed between the seat and console.

Mom didn’t talk about the wreck much, and she never asked me questions about that night. If I tried to ask her questions, she changed the subject and started talking about the dog or the new mailman. She still hadn’t asked how I ended up in the car with them, when I was supposed to be at Allie’s house.

I didn't find out Allie died until I had been in the hospital for two days. Doctors kept me sedated because of the swelling, and they didn't want me moving. Mom told me after I ate my first meal since I'd been awake, which had consisted of green Jell-O and beef bouillon soup. She'd scooted her chair up to my bed and asked me how I was feeling and if my head was still hurting. When I told her that, no I felt better, she said without taking a breath, "Honey, I don't know how else to tell you, but that she's gone. Allie is gone."

"What do you mean she's gone? Gone where? She's just in the hospital like I am."

"Lindsey, she didn't survive the wreck. She didn't have her seatbelt on. I'm so sorry," she said as she held my hand and wiped her own tears away.

"Mom, she can't be dead. She's my best friend." I grabbed the railing of the bed and tried to move to get out of bed and pain shot through my arms and head. The pain stopped there. My legs couldn't hurt.

"Honey, you can't get up. Not yet. I'm sorry Lindsey; I'm so sorry."

"Mom, why didn't you tell me earlier? She's my best friend. Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"Lindsey, it was bad enough we had to tell you that you couldn't walk—that you were paralyzed. I couldn't tell you. Her funeral is tomorrow, and I planned to go."

"Mom, why don't you just leave, now?"

"Sweetie, you need your family. Please don't say that."

"Fine, stay. Just don't talk to me."

*

People always looked as if they were about to cry when they were around me, so I just stayed quiet. Mom made a catchphrase out of the letters B.C. It meant before chair, short for wheelchair. Her way of dropping a hint of what life had been like when she talked to people. The only thing I wanted to think about was the next time I could have pain meds, not to relearn how to walk, because according to Dad, miracles didn't happen anymore, and I just needed to accept the reality of what happened to me.

The door to my room opened, and a pierced, purple-headed woman walked in and handed mom a schedule.

"Hi Lindsey, I'm Julie, and we are going to work on therapy goals today. I just wanted to stop in and say hi and tell you we are going to work on goals today."

"Goals? Are we playing soccer?"

"Goals, things you want to do before you leave. The hard work you plan on doing each day."

"Sure, but only if you people can find me some normal food." I stabbed my fork at the gray meatloaf on the plate.

"Great Lindsey, it sounds like you just set your first reward." She smiled and left.

"She looks totally normal, right?" I asked as I picked through the salad for the cucumbers with my fingers.

"I'm sure she's a very nice girl, Lindsey."

"Ok, Polly Positive. Mom, you look like a zombie. Blink."

"Sorry, I'm just tired. Your sister wants to see you, and I'm trying to figure it out."

“Have Dad bring her. Mom, I don’t know what kind of goals they want me to set. Like, finishing high school?” I put the lid back on my food and pushed the tray away.

“So ask her. Something like learning how to get in a car again, or learning how to drive.”

We both looked down at my legs.

“That won’t be hard at all.” I rolled my eyes at her as I leaned back on my bed just as the nurse came in to move me to my chair.

“Lindsey, I’ll grab your bag and meet you in the gym.” She walked out of the room and let the door slam behind her.

“Lindsey, you’ll have appointments in the gym each day, and most of the time it will be your responsibility to get there on time. Is there anything I can get you?” the nurse asked as she pushed me up to a mat.

“Not unless you can find my life somewhere,” I said as I turned my head to look at her, but it hurt, and I winced. Everything hurt.

“Do you want pain meds? You have a few options to help you,” she asked as she turned to her computer.

“Sure, give me all the drugs. Which ones can you give me that will kill me or at least make me not care?” I asked.

“Oh, Lindsey, Miss Sunshine. I’ve been looking forward to working with you, and by the way, we don’t give you enough pain meds to kill you, just enough that you drool all over yourself so we can point and laugh.” The same girl with purple hair walked towards us with a t-shirt in her hands.

“Oh, good, it’s you. How have you not been fired?”

“I’m Julie. I’ll be your best friend by the time you leave. I’m going to teach you how to sit up and move from one surface to another and maneuver a chair in a variety of ways. Your OT will teach life skills, and I’ll teach you how to make your body strong again. Deal?”

“Do I have a choice?” I asked, as I took the meds out of the white paper cup and tried to wash them down.

“Yes, you have a choice, but you might want to consider being able to wipe your own ass and not having multiple nurses and your mom do it every day. Just a thought.”

I looked at mom, and she wouldn’t make eye contact with me, which seemed to be standard for her these days.

“Hi Mom, I’m Julie. It looks like you’ve got a tough girl. Are you all ready to get to work?” Mom looked at Julie with a raised eyebrow, as though this purple-headed woman was an enemy. She didn’t like it when someone stepped on her mom toes.

“We get to teach Lindsey and you as a family how to do life differently.”

“Okay, I’m here. Use me.”

“Great. It’s going to be hard for you to not do things for her, tying her shoes, brushing her hair. She needs to be able to do things for herself.

“I just want to help her. She hurts all the time now.” She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“She will heal, and it will get better, that’s why we set goals, to allow her independence with the things she wants to do most and then just small things around the house, like emptying the trash or cooking. It will give you both freedom.” She started walking towards a mat and motioned us to follow.

"I'm not sure Lindsey has ever taken out the trash, and we don't let her cook after the macaroni and cheese fire incidents." She looked over at me with a feigned smile.

"Lindsey, how's your pain now after the medication?" She moved a half shaped ball over on the mat.

"Much better, unless I have to move."

"Get ready, Sister, because we are going to Move It, Move It. I love that movie, don't you?" She pulled a stool up and sat down on it, facing me.

"I'm not four, so no."

"Okay, the first thing we are going to do is get you out of this chair. You are going to move to the mat and sit supported with a variety of cushions while we make your goal list, okay?"

Before Julie had time to react, I leaned forward and attempted to scoot my butt, leading with my head, and a flash of pain shot through my neck and caused me to fall over sideways.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. First lesson. You don't move until I tell you or we agree. Deal? I don't want to pick you up off this floor. Let's try this again, and I will talk you through it."

After a few minutes, and profuse sweating on my part, with step-by-step directions, I was sitting on the mat. It took so many different steps to move to the mat.

"It should not take me that many steps to just scoot over. I'm never going to be able to do this."

"You will; I promise. We will practice to the point you will be sick of it, but the more you practice, the more fluid the motion becomes, and you don't have to go step-by-step. Your body will just do it."

Julie positioned a table in front of me. On it, she placed paper, markers, and a cup.

"Lindsey, we are going to see how much balance you have. I'm going to have you sit on a disc with little bubbles on it. Its job is to make it hard for you to sit up. You have to use your trunk to balance. Oh, and no hands on the mat."

"You're just mean."

"I try. Let's go."

"I feel like I'm going to fall on my face." I said as I continued moving my arms and body to keep from falling over. I felt like a tight-rope walker without the legs.

"Good, Good. You didn't face plant on the floor."

"You are so kind, Julie. I'm so lucky to have you." I stuck my tongue out at her as she scooted in front of me on a stool.

"All right Lindsey, your second goal for today is to transfer back to your chair. This will be hard at first, but you'll learn how to move your body, and that will allow you to bump over to the couch, toilet, bed, or anywhere else you want to move to. I'm sending your new, shiny transfer boards back to your room with a bag of Sharpies so you can decorate them."

"What are transfer boards?" I asked as I watched a person in flowery scrubs put things down next to me.

"Lindsey, you'll place this board between the two surfaces you want to move between and slide across it."

“That doesn’t sound hard at all. I’ll make them pretty tonight while we watch *The Bachelorette*.”

“I may come crash your room; I don’t have cable at home.”

“Mom, you have homework, too.” Julie handed her a packet of paperwork and a folder.

“The folder is all the great restaurants and shops around that deliver or are walkable; Rocky’s is my favorite. The packet has questions about your house, things you’ll need to think about, like bathrooms, entrances with stairs, counter heights, etc.”

Mom looked like she was about to cry and wouldn’t look up at Julie. She just rubbed her thumb on the address label on the folder over and over.

“We don’t have to have it all right now, but it’s helpful to know Lindsey’s home set-up. Such as how high is her bed from the floor. We can make our mats that height so she can practice getting into bed. We will try to mirror your house as much as we can.”

“There’s just so much to think about.”

“You’re right, but we will help you figure out what you need. Also, the parent dinner is every Friday night in the lounge. They bring in great Italian food, and you should totally go so you can meet other families.”

“Thank you, I’ll think about it.”

“You just got shut down, Julie,” I said as I picked through the Sharpies looking for my favorite color.

“Lindsey, hush your mouth. I’ll think about it Julie, thank you.”

“Hey Lindsey, if you can talk your mom into going tonight, I’ll bring your first reward from your list tomorrow.”

“Hey Mom, you’re going to dinner tonight. I could use some quiet time. By the way, it doesn’t count if the waffle fries are cold, Julie.” I outlined flowers on the corner of the board as I listened to mom try to squirm out of meeting people.

“You expect me to keep Chick-fil-A fries hot?” She tightened her ponytail and nametag.

“Yep.”

“Mom, is she always this feisty?”

“She doesn’t do a thing she doesn’t want to.” She reached over and brushed hair off my face.

“Don’t touch me. Okay, I’m out of here. I want something to drink, and I’m going to watch a movie. Let’s go, Mom.”

*

We went back to our room and fell asleep watching *Dirty Dancing*. I was tired and forgot about talking Mom into going to dinner with the other parents, but when I woke up, she was gone, and my tray was sitting at the foot of my bed. I couldn’t reach it, so I sat and stared at it and the dying flowers on the windowsill.

When the accident first happened, I had a room full of flowers and people. Then people were too busy to see me since I’d moved to this new place. I’d heard all the lame excuses.

“Sorry, Lindsey, I want to come see you, but I have practice tonight, and this weekend a bunch of us are going to a haunted house. Maybe we can go again when you get out.”

“Yeah, my wheelchair probably won’t be able to move through a haunted house, but thanks for thinking of me.” I wanted to add that if they could drive an hour to the haunted house, they could come see me, and that I’m not in prison. You don’t get out. I missed being with my friends, when my biggest problem was getting my clothes back from my sister.

Allie’s parents visited me a few times. I missed her and wished that I could have talked her out of going that night. One of the only things I remembered was her laughing and singing “Baby Got Back.” Then her voice stopped. I don’t know if it was my hearing or when she died. The silence is what wakes me up. It isn’t the screaming, but her becoming quiet.

Mom didn’t like them coming to see me. She didn’t say it, but I heard her on the phone with someone.

“It’s every parent’s worst nightmare. You think you can trust other parents, and you just can’t. I should have known after they snuck out together there would be trouble.”

I don’t know who she was talking to, but I knew that she and Dad were furious at Chris’ parents. They had no idea that he was even out with the car. They were out of town and had left him home for the weekend. Mom said his mom tried to hug her at Allie’s funeral.

“Lindsey, why would they show up to her funeral? He killed her, and they have the nerve to show up?”

“Mom, if they hadn’t shown up, people would have criticized that too. Just let it be. We all made a choice to ride with him.” I didn’t believe a word of that, but it was destroying her.

Sean had wheeled his chair down the hall a few times to see me. When we were both in the hospital after surgeons operated on his knee, and we were both stuck in a wheelchair, we raced down the hallway to the nurse's station. My right hand wasn't strong, and his leg stuck out, covered by a brace. We looked pathetic but had fun. I hadn't talked to him since they moved me to rehab. Sean still couldn't drive with his leg messed up. We hadn't ever been friends at school, but since the wreck, we had developed a friendship.

His mom was sweet and brought me pink cupcakes when she came to visit him. I didn't tell her that I hated pink anything and sweets. She had a nervous habit of patting my bed and my hand while she was talking.

"Sean said very nice things about you, Lindsey. He said that you didn't know each other before that night."

"Yes, that's right, Ma'am. Allie asked Chris to bring us home from the game. That's all it was supposed to be that night."

"Well, you need to work hard, and maybe this wheelchair thing will go away. Just work hard, okay, Lindsey?"

"Yes Ma'am and thank you for bringing me the cupcakes, they are pretty. Did you make them?"

"You're welcome, and we will come see you again soon." She turned to look at me as she pulled the door closed.

She hadn't been back. People seemed nervous when they were in my room, like they didn't know what to say to my parents or me. Our church sent me a bouquet of cookies in the shape of feet that said, 'hope you're back on your feet soon.' The worst

thing I'd heard so far was, "Honey, it's okay. People will still love you even if you are paralyzed. You'll find someone who can still love you." I just didn't expect it from my grandma.

*

I finished my first full week of therapy, and I got to leave the building and go across the street to an ice cream place. It was the first time I'd been outside since they'd transferred me here. Julie made it a therapy session, so that meant I had to do certain things on her list. I had to brainstorm different ways to find a table that my chair would fit under in a restaurant or maneuver through a line where people didn't respect the space around my chair.

"You'd think they would fix a ramp outside of a rehab facility, wouldn't you, Julie?" Mom asked as she sidestepped the puddle.

"You'd think. The only bright side is that it allows us to teach you how to get around these. Sadly, you will find more of these that are messed up than you will find good ramps."

"Great job, Lindsey. Who's buying me ice cream?" Julie asked as she put her hair in a bun.

"No, you're buying me ice cream, lady. I met my goals, that was the deal."

"Okay, fine, get Superman or the Salted Caramel, they're my favorite."

"What's the worst thing you've seen someone do with their wheelchair?"

"I've seen people flip chairs just about any way you can imagine. People falling face first scare me the most, because you can fracture something from the impact."

"Well, I haven't done that yet."

“Oh, you will, but we’ll teach you what to do when it happens.”

“Are you going to push me over? Mom, did you hear that? Patient abused by therapist, details at 8.”

“You, Miss Sassy Pants, will learn how to flip yourself backward and pull yourself back to a sitting position while you are strapped in your chair.”

“On purpose?” Mom looked shocked as we got in line.

“Falls are going to happen, and she needs to know how to do it safely, so she doesn't break her hand, or worse, and then to learn how to get back in her chair. It also works if she's at home, and she wants to watch TV while she lays on the floor. She can get off the floor and back into her chair.”

“That sounds interesting. While you two are getting ice cream, I'm going across the hall for some coffee.”

“Your mom loves you, Lindsey. Do you two have fun together?” She asked as she moved a chair out of the way so I could wheel through.

“Yes, but she worries too much. She's so cranky lately.”

“Sounds about right, she is your mom. Does she work?”

“A real estate agent. Okay, should I get a cone or a cup?”

“Your choice.”

I rolled up to the counter and realized I was eye level with the names, but couldn't see into the containers. The guy behind the counter couldn't see me at all. I could see him through the glass case and realized his zipper was down. I motioned to Julie, and she smiled and whispered into my ear, “You will see more of that than you can imagine.”

I rolled my eyes and stuck out my tongue like I was gagging, and we both started giggling.

Julie spoke up for me, “Hi there, my friend here would like to try a few samples. Can you help us with that?”

“Yes, ma'am. My favorite is the mint chocolate chip.”

“That’s Mom’s favorite, but I want to try the Caramel and maybe the cookie dough.”

“I want a cup of Superman, please. It’s my new favorite.” Julie sat down at a table at the edge of the restaurant. Mom was talking on her phone with a coffee in her hands as she waved at us.

“Okay, here’s the Salted Caramel.” He stretched his arm over the top of the glass counter to hand it to me.

“You mean KAR-muhl?”

“You must be from down south? Can you take this to your friend? And here’s your cone.”

“Y'all set me up.” I looked up at him holding my cone in a wad of napkins. Now I realized why Julie got the cup. I could have put the cup in my lap while I pushed. “Well, that sucks. Julie, why didn’t you tell me?” She stood up and walked towards me.

“Who cares, I’m not moving, and I’m going to marry this ice cream, it’s so good.”

“You look like you managed pretty well. Good job Lindsey.” Mom walked in and sat down at a table.

“You were watching me?” I asked as I licked the drips off my hand.

“I was on the phone and saw you through the window.”

“Stalker.” I took a bite out of the side of the cone, and it smeared on my chin and dripped onto my shirt.

“Lindsey, please wipe your face off. You have the manners of a savage,” Mom said as she handed me napkins.

“Mom, that can be a therapy goal if you want,” Julie said as she tossed her bowl into the trashcan.

“Yes. Please call me Renee. You’d think the wreck did this to her, but no, she’s just gross.”

“Alright, finish up, so we can go back across the street. We have two things left for today, and then you get the rest of the afternoon off.”

“What is it? Talking about our feelings?”

“No, but that is a great idea, and we can do that tomorrow.”

“We have a fake bathroom upstairs, and I want you to try a few things. Try out a few shower benches so we can recommend some things for you at home.”

“Sounds exciting. What’s the other thing?”

“Therapy animals are here today. We have two dogs and a Shetland pony. If we get there early enough, they will give you treats to feed them.”

“Neat, I miss my dog.”

“Let’s go. Renee, any thoughts?”

“Shower benches, huh? Does insurance cover that?”

“Sadly, usually no, because they don’t consider bathroom equipment a necessity. It makes our jobs frustrating because there are things that people need in their homes and

insurance won't pay for what Lindsay will need. That's why we are starting with ideas now, so you have plenty of time to have these things in place for when she goes home."

"When do I get to go home?" I asked as I pushed the elevator buttons while Mom shuffled my stuff.

"Great question. Obviously, the longer you are here, the stronger you get, and the more we can work with you, but insurance has standards. They get the final say."

"So, no idea."

"You just got here, and you have several things to accomplish, so let's work on mastering those."

*

My school started sending work for me to do each day after therapy. Just what I wanted to do after I got beat up all day was to have to conjugate verbs in Spanish and solve math problems. I was bummed when I found out my English class had started research papers while I was stuck in the hospital.

Sean stopped by one night with a pile of articles and topic suggestions. He had been back at school for a few weeks and was trying to catch up on his work. Our teacher, Ms. Gardner, told him that if he wanted to bring stuff by, I could start on it, and they would help me get the research tools I needed. Mom said I should have written about underage drinking. I didn't talk to her the rest of the day. She still couldn't believe the fact that I hadn't drank that night.

"Guilt by association, Lindsey."

"Mom, what does that even mean?"

We discussed a few things, but it usually came out in nasty ways.

She acted like I was helpless, but not enough for her to help me or even show that she was sad for me. Her snarky comments got old, especially if I was in therapy and working on pulling my pants up or moving from a fake toilet back to my chair.

“Lindsey, this might be a time to rethink your wardrobe.”

“Great, Mom. Thanks. I can wear elastic pants that come up to my neck. Would that make you happy?” She never responded, but walked out of the gym.

My dad came less and less, and Mom had stopped staying the nights with me so, that she could work. I could do more things for myself, but nights were hard for me, and I hated being alone. I had a hard time sleeping because I couldn't ever get comfortable. My nightmares got worse, and details of the wreck were coming back. I asked Sean during a visit what he remembered.

“Lindsey, I can't stop thinking about it. It's like a movie in my head. I know the sounds, the smells, and the way the lights flashed when they were trying to get you and Allie out.”

“The cops told my parents that Chris had pot on him, that he was high when we got in the car, but I didn't know. They drug tested both of us, and I was clean, but he wasn't. Allie's parents are pissed, and they want somebody to pay. I'm not supposed to talk to anybody because of the legal stuff.”

“I mean, she got in the car on her own. We all did.”

“Yeah, but the defense is that she wouldn't have if she'd known he was high.”

“Yes, she would have. She knew he was drinking. She had been dying for a chance at him, and she wasn't going to say no.”

“Have the cops talked to you at all? About that night?”

“They talked to me in the hospital, but it was more about where I was in the car and had I drank or did I know who was drinking. Honestly, I couldn’t remember anything. I keep hearing tires screeching. I don’t know if it was ours or what? Who hit us? Mom never said anything, she won’t talk about it.”

“A pizza delivery guy. He looked down to check his next delivery address. Dad said when he looked up, we were already crossways in front of him. He had music blaring, but heard Chris’s tires squalling over the music.”

“So Chris pulled out in front of him, tires squealing, and that’s when he hit us? That must be the sound I keep dreaming about. The only thing I remember is hearing Allie singing. Then silence.”

“I don’t remember her singing, but you grabbed my arm because when the guy hit us, it made us spin around, and you were flipping everywhere. I can’t get that image out of my brain. You had that damn lap belt on, instead of you rolling everywhere, you flopped like a rag doll.”

“How did you hurt your knee?”

“Remember, I complained when I got in the back because my legs were too long. When we got hit, I had been sitting with my knee against the corner of the seat and the console. I hit it so hard, I broke his console loose. He fell back at one point and busted me in the face with his head because he didn’t have a seatbelt on.”

“So neither of them had seatbelts on, and Chris is walking around, and she’s dead. How is that fair?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you know when she died? I mean I don't want to know, but I can't not know either, and my mom won't talk about it.”

“No, but the other car hit right in the middle of the front and back door. I think it crushed her, but because the pizza guy was speeding, it kept pushing us and that's what made you keep moving around.”

“I miss her; I keep wanting to call her and tell her to come sit with me. Her parents don't visit me.”

“You two fought that entire night.”

“I mean yeah, I was pissed at her, but I still love her.”

“People are weird to me at school now. Like friends of hers and yours won't even talk to me. I mean I know we didn't talk much before, but we had a lot of the same friends.”

“Are people talking about Chris or Allie?”

“I've heard all kinds of things like Allie was pregnant and Chris didn't want it.”

“You realize they've never even kissed, right? That was one of the first times they ever got together. She'd been watching him for a while and jumped when she heard you all were leaving. That's when she asked if we could catch a ride home.”

“Yeah, he told me that he had planned on taking her somewhere and convinced me to skip out on a party. He said I'd have a chance with you. That's why he commented that he was 'sorry I was out of luck' because of your PMS situation.”

“We made total fools of ourselves in Walgreens. I tried on every pair of sunglasses and lipstick they had.”

“I remember, and it wasn't your greatest look. You are pretty. You didn't need all that crap.”

“I'm pretty? But my hair is a mess, and it's gross where they shaved it in spots.”

“I've seen you when you aren't in the hospital, and you are pretty. And I still remember your perfume from that night.”

A nurse walked in and reminded me that I had to be somewhere. Somewhere meant the bathroom. Code talk. They had my bladder on a clock, and it sucked, and it wasn't something I could do with this guy in the room who had just told me I was pretty.

“I'll go. Do you want me to come back tomorrow to help you with your paper? Can I bring you some food? Allie told me that was the way to win you over.”

“What? When did she tell you that?”

“She was trying to set us up in Walgreens.”

“Of course she was. She couldn't ever just let me do things my own way.”

“Sorry, I didn't mean to bum you out. I'll see ya.”

“No, Sean, I'm sorry. You're sweet; I'm just, I just miss her.”

“I understand. I mean, Chris didn't die, but we aren't friends anymore. Too much stuff happened. It sucks. See you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that'd be great, and you don't even have to bring me food.”

*

My days started to get easier as the nurses and therapists and I figured out a routine that worked for my body. I had learned to get dressed without falling off my bed or out of my chair. I had figured out how to open a heavy metal door when I was alone. Mom traded her tiny car for an SUV so that my wheelchair would fit, and we practiced

getting me in and out. I smashed my fingers repeatedly between the car and my chair. While I worked with Julie the most, there were other therapists I learned to do things with. One afternoon, Alex, decided to do gait training. They wanted me up on my feet, standing.

I knew my body was a mess, because I'd listened to the doctors telling me how I couldn't sweat like an average person anymore and that I'd never have the urge to pee again. I had to protect my skin, because if I didn't, the infection could kill me. Today, they tried something new. I'm not sure who this was supposed to make happy, seeing me standing, but it was painful. "This honestly is one of the best things you can do for your body. Your body is built to stand and shift weight from leg to leg and from one butt cheek to the other. It isn't meant to be static. That's why therapy is so good for you. It's the equivalent of me working out in a gym."

"Except, I never see your work out."

"True. That's why I have the name badge, and you have the bracelet.

Therapist/patient. Say it with me now, Lindsey."

"Rude," I said as I gripped the parallel bars, while he forced my legs to move one in front of the other, while I looked in the mirror.

"Okay, how does this feel? Are you light-headed, hot, anything weird? I'm looking for signs of stress on your body."

"You stress my brain, Alex. This would be better if I had food."

"All right, focus, Lindsey. Really connect your brain with the movement of your leg moving."

“Back to this working out thing. I think you should have to work out when I do therapy. It’s only fair. You make me work hard.”

“Just what kind of workout are you talking about?”

“I get to make up a workout for you, and Julie has to do it too, since I started with her and all.”

“I hear somebody talking about me out there,” Julie yelled from the office.

“Yep, Miss Lindsey has decided we don’t work as hard as she does. She wants to make a workout for me, but wants you to do it too.”

“How in the hell did you rope me into this one, Alex?”

“Again, Julie. How are you not fired?” I asked her as I twirled my hair.

“Good help is hard to find, and I get crap done, so they keep me around.”

“All right. Let’s make a bet. Loser has to do a workout the other plans for them. How’s that sound?” he asked as he lowered me down and helped me across to my chair.

“Deal, so what’s the bet?” I mentally pictured them sweating from the terror I was going to put them through.

“What if we set up an obstacle course type thing, and whoever completes it the fastest wins?”

“What, like you all would use wheelchairs?”

“Yeah, and you can time us and make sure that Alex doesn’t cheat.”

“Okay, sounds fair. Then I get to race whoever wins.”

“Look, she’s feeling bold. Think you can beat her?”

“It’s how I roll,” I said as I spun in a small circle and popped a wheelie.”

“Dude, who taught you that skill?”

“One of the kids in the playroom. I go in and do puzzles with them after dinner.”

“All right, Miss Smarty Pants. Let me figure out when we can host this lovely game. You are going to love your challenge.”

“Well, you are mean, so I wouldn’t be surprised if you tried to kill me.”

“Oh Lord, she’s back. Her mother told me when she started with these comments we better watch out. I’ve got some fun stuff for you to work on tomorrow, but until then, get out of here and go do some puzzles or homework.”

“Okay, G’night, Alex and Julie. I know I’m your favorite.” I wheeled down the hallway. I didn’t understand why they always made me come to the gym for each session at first, but then I realized that was to take power of my own care and to make me plan and deal with obstacles. Mom wasn’t here during the day as much, and so I had to do more things for myself.

I got back to the room and bumped the door with my chair and was met with yelling and cheers. They were so loud I couldn’t hear anything except ringing in my ears. My heart was pounding in my chest. I felt sweat beading up on my forehead and acid rising in my throat. I backed my chair up until I hit the wall. I turned my chair to the side so I could lean against the wall until the room stopped spinning.

“Lindsey, are you okay?”

I couldn’t hear anything Mom said. I kept my eyes closed and felt someone wrap a blood pressure cuff around my arm and begin squeezing. The pressure on my arm was keeping me from breathing. I tried to open my eyes to look at Mom, but everything was fuzzy and bright.

“Lindsey, listen to me. Take a deep breath with me. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Okay, squeeze my hand. Again. You are having a panic attack. Don’t talk, just breathe, okay?”

“Hey, Lindsey, it’s Mom. We just wanted to surprise you. Breathe, sweetie.”

“All right sweetie, your blood pressure is starting to come down, but you need to keep breathing. This happens to people all the time. Something stressful happens or startles you, and your body’s reaction to excitement. Yours just couldn’t take it. It does look like you have a bunch of people in there that love you. Let me know when the ringing in your ears stops.” One of my favorite nurses bent down beside me and held my hand.

I sat up and took a full deep breath, “I felt like I was having a heart attack.”

“Yep, that can be what they feel like. It’s not fun, but they are treatable. Why don’t you all go to the family room, so you have more space? And Mom, maybe nobody else screaming surprise.”

“I can’t do anything right for her. I almost gave her a heart attack.” She let the door close behind her as she slid to the floor.

"It's fine. She will be fine, and this was probably bound to happen at some point. I'll help you move stuff. It's worth it to her to talk to a mental health professional. One thing that I haven't told her yet is, that as hard as it is here, going home is much harder. Because here she hasn't known any different. At home, she knows every bit of what she used to do. She could walk through the house in the dark and know exactly where she was. That is all going to be different, and it's wise to find someone that she can work with now for when she needs a voice.

Families learn to live life here, and as difficult as it is, you learn a routine and nothing else fights that routine. When you go home, you reenter the world of disruptions, and things never being as easy as they should be. A mother told me they were terrified to take their five-year-old home because they were scared they would break her. It's not all that different from bringing a new baby home, but this one is opinionated and sassy. She will come through this, but she's going to need tools."

*

Sean had become a close friend. He came to see me every few days with a new pile of stuff from our English class. I was writing my research paper on chemicals in our food, and Sean wrote his on performance drugs in sports. Neither of us understood the other's topic, but we helped to ask good questions. He also kept me filled in with who was dating whom and which side Mr. Adam's hair had been brushed to that day.

Sean sometimes surprised me at the end of my therapy session. I had been on a mat on the floor, and the goal was to get back in my chair, without help. Alex was helping me finish the last transfer, and as I clicked the seat belt, I heard, "Not bad, Lindsey."

"Hey, how long have you been standing there?" I pulled my hair up into a ponytail and scooted around in my chair and rolled towards him.

"Long enough to see you that your biceps are bigger than mine." He stood there nervously with his hands in his pockets.

"Hi, I'm Alex, nice to meet you. You must be Sean."

"Yeah, I am. How'd you know that?" He looked over at me.

"Lindsey talks about you. Sounds like you've saved her butt with school."

“Um, excuse me. I’m right here. Down here, but I can still hear you,” I said as I wheeled between them.

“Lindsey, I have a surprise for you, but it’s in the game room. Come check it out?”

“Yay, I love surprises. Bye, Alex, see you for physical torture tomorrow!”

I wheeled into the game room and saw all my school stuff piled up. I turned to look up at him. "Thanks, Sean you are a lifesaver for bringing me school stuff. Mom forgot to go yesterday.”

“There’s more. Look behind your books.”

I wheeled around the table to see a big lemonade and a bag from Chick-fil-A. The sauces had been arranged to spell out the word, ‘HI.’

“You are my favorite, Sean. Thank you. I’d jump up and hug you if I could.”

I dumped all the food out and began mixing my favorite Chick-Fil-A concoction.

“A little bit sweet, a little bit spicy," I said as I licked the Polynesian sauce off my fingers, one by one. Food tasted good again.

“You do realize how gross you are. You have some on your shirt.”

“Ya, my mom tells me all the time, and Julie made it a therapy goal, oh well. You are the best for bringing this to me. But can I ask you a question?”

"It's a bribe to make you help me with my paper, because I suck at writing.”

“When you were telling me about the wreck that night, you said Chris told you that you had a shot with me? Did you like me?”

He pulled a chair over to sit by me. He wouldn’t look up at me but sat and picked at his cuticles.

“I can’t stop thinking about you saying you thought you had a chance with me?”

“I thought you were cute.”

“Okay, that’s it?”

“Lindsey, you are not always the brightest girl.”

"Wow, thanks. You told me I was gross and stupid."

"Lindsey, think about how many days I've been up here to see you. I don't have to bring your homework; I asked your mom if I could bring it up. I like spending time with you. At first, it was because nobody else understood how hard this has been, and I felt a little guilty. I know you didn't want to be with us that night. But you are funny, and Allie was right. You are sweet. That's why I spent my last \$10 bucks on nasty Chick-Fil-A for you."

“Whoa, hold up. Chick-Fil-A? Nasty?”

"Seriously, that's your response? I'm going home."

“Sean, I think you are cute, and I'm sad on the days I don't get to see you. You have become one of my favorite people. Now I see why Allie kept pushing us together. Come on, finish your food; you've got to help me write my intro.”

“Okay, I’ll make you a deal. When you get out of here, we go on an actual date. Will you go out with me?”

“Can I think about it?”

“Are you shooting me down?”

“No, I just want to make sure you know what you are asking. I can't walk, and I have bad table manners. Doesn't sound like the greatest date."

“I can take a hint.” He dropped his head and picked at a sticker on the side of my science book.

“It’s not like that. My best friend’s dead, and I’m still in the hospital. I’m not exactly living my best life.”

“I get it.” He stood up and backed away from me.

“Sean, I want us to be friends, but I don’t have more than that right now. I don’t even know that I can take a shower in my own house. I’m scared to leave here.”

“That’s fair. I guess I didn’t think about that. Just keep doing what you’re doing, and we can still be friends. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Then can you at least bend down so I can give you a hug?”

“We’re still alive.”

“If you can call it that,” I said as I hugged him.

Life After Death

Pastor Alan Walker preached Easter Sunday services at his church, the first since Karen had died. It had been fifteen Sundays since she died and thirteen Sundays since his daughters had been home. He'd been drinking for weeks. Nobody cared about your heartbreak after three weeks. Someone new died, had a baby, or had an affair. Alan had watched it in his congregation, and now he was the forgotten subject, reduced to pats on the arm and slaps on the back. Nobody asked him how he was feeling, and no one talked about his sweet Karen.

This morning's Easter service had been like most: ladies in hats with little girls twirling in spring-colored, floral dresses, and shiny white shoes. Mrs. Morgan had worn that god-awful hat with the bird perched on it again this year. Kids scooted away from her as she walked down the aisle to her pew.

"Good morning, Mrs. Morgan. Now, now, you know we can't have birds flying around the sanctuary this morning, or they'll distract from my good preaching."

"Oh, Pastor, you are a silly one, aren't you? You know it's just a decoration." She leaned in, "I wear it for the children, because I think they like it. I always hear them giggling about it, and your preaching can't be beat," she'd said with a wink and a smile.

"Well, that's very sweet of you to keep them entertained."

"I do what I can," she said as she shimmied her hips between the pews to take her seat.

Alan had taken too much time greeting everyone, and he didn't have time for a bathroom break before the choir entered the loft.

"Alright congregation, you know how the story goes, because you've probably heard it since you were five-years-old. Give me a show of hands if you ever saw it told on a flannel board."

Hands shot up with a simultaneous laugh.

"Well, then. I don't need to bore you with Easter egg stories, and just for the record, I want you all to know Jesus doesn't know the Easter Bunny, and I'm pretty sure there were no Peeps at the Last Supper."

Nervous laughter.

"On the third day, Jesus rose from the grave. On the third day, Ladies, He did the laundry when He folded His grave clothes," he said with a thunderous voice. "On the third day, He rolled that stone away and walked right out of that grave." He banged his fist on the pulpit, causing the glass of water to teeter on edge. His voice rose louder and louder. "On the third day, He appeared to Mary and the disciples." He brought his voice down to an intimate tone. "On His third day of death, He conquered it and went to tell all of his friends about it."

"So I ask you church family, what would you do on your third day of death? Can you beat death and, rise to life, and walk in the newness of life? If the answer is no, then you need to come down here to talk to me or one of us. We will teach you what it means

to walk in the newness of life and to have the same power that He held that day and continues to hold today.”

“Ushers, Song leaders, let’s play *Just As I Am* and have an invitation for people to come.”

*

Preaching for Alan meant he needed eye contact, but he couldn’t with all the hats. He blamed it on the hats; it might have just been missing Karen's face in the second row or the drink he'd helped himself to in the closet while he tied his tie. Liquor in his coffee slid down easy.

When he’d hit a particularly good point, he'd see heads nodding in agreement, or when he'd recounted the death of a dog recently, people brushed tears away. Sermons about money guaranteed he'd see tops of heads as people looked down at their shoes, Bibles, or hymnals. Those sermons tended to cause lots of coughs and movement in the pews and conversations after service. Alan felt assaulted the way they’d carry on grabbing his elbow with the opposite hand.

A sermon preached about marriage would prompt men to ask, “Did my wife tell you to say that?” The good-hearted comments still left a sting. “Good to see you, Pastor, the new building, looks great, or Pastor, I put some money in the plate make sure it’s well spent now.”

“Yes sir,” was always the response. What else was there to say? He knew he wouldn’t see them until there was a family tragedy or a wedding.

He’d been invited to Easter dinner by few families. Alan hadn’t wanted to be a burden and didn’t want to answer questions, because he had never been good at talking

about himself. Instead, he got a fried chicken meal from the Minit-Mart by the church to eat while he watched westerns on television. Karen never let him eat in front of the television, and she would have been angry that he was eating fried chicken and using her best hand towels.

As he finished the last bite of yellowed potato salad, he thought about past Easters Karen had cooked for the family. Last year she had been too sick, and even though his daughter Penny had been staying at the house, she was no cook. Several ladies dropped Easter dinner off, so they could enjoy it without the stress of cooking. Karen had even eaten a few bites.

“My goodness, those quilting ladies sure could cook; those rolls could change your life, John,” he said to John Wayne in *True Grit* as the eyepatch-wearing cowboy drunkenly fell off his horse.

*

Alan hadn't learned how to live life without Karen yet. He had no idea of his appointments because Karen had always taken care of it. She would leave a sticky note on his keys. Recently, when the exterminator called to schedule his annual termite inspection, he'd deleted the message. Karen had handled the home details, and Nancy, his church secretary, kept his pastoral duties organized. He knew when he needed to be at a hospital bedside or a meeting with the association. Karen and Nancy joked for years that he had two wives: a work wife and a home wife.

His daughters hadn't been home since the funeral. They'd never been great about visiting, but they always made it home for the holidays. Alan and Karen enjoyed visiting battlefields and planned their vacations around those they hadn't visited. Penny, his

oldest, moved every few years with her husband and his job to a new part of the country. It gave him and Karen a chance to see Penny and her family while sightseeing. Karen joked that she had to write her Penny's address in pencil in her address book because they had moved so often. The last house Penny and her husband built was too much for them.

“What kind of fancy pants has she become, Karen? We didn’t raise her that way, did we?”

“Alan, she works hard, and so does her husband. They keep their bills paid, and they are good to those around them. What more can you ask for?”

“I just think she’s living a little beyond her means. She doesn’t even cook, so why does she need two ovens?”

“Probably for the same reason you have 22 suits and about 100 different ties. Because you want to.”

They hadn’t talked much the rest of that trip home. Alan remembered he'd turned his radio to the AM station as he drove through the Shenandoah Valley, listening to facts about battlegrounds.

Bethany had always been more of a daddy's girl. Even so, she had started a new job and hadn't called home much. She was working as an assistant for a lawyer in town instead of using her non-profit leadership degree. He’d secretly hoped that she’d stay close to home and work at his church.

Karen had watched his sermons every Thursday night on the public access channel. She left him notes that told him how his suit looked and what her favorite part of his three-point sermon was. They never talked about it, but there was a sheet of her monogrammed stationery on his desk each Friday morning. She watched the previous

Sundays' sermon while he was at the deacons' meeting. The last one she wrote (which he kept in his top drawer) said, "tie looked cheap, but suit looked splendid. Points were well articulated, but your story about two women in the grocery store line was long-winded, and I'm not sure it was appropriate—it wasn't funny if that's what you were going for." Alan hated the sound of his voice, and he'd always thought she was proud of his preaching.

Now, he found himself missing her notes. He missed the Friday morning ritual of reading her neat penmanship and realizing she had taken time to sit and watch his sermon. Alan had stuffed the "cheap" blue-and-red striped tie down the garbage disposal. It hadn't worked since.

Alan remarked many times how quiet the church was when it was empty. He had found it peaceful and at times therapeutic to go and sit in a pew and allow the silence to wash over him, but even that hadn't worked since he'd started preaching again. Pastor Alan preached about Paul having plenty and having nothing, thinking that would inspire everyone to be content in whatever situation they were living. There had been a strange quiet over the crowd. Alan had only preached a few times since he'd been back and couldn't seem to find his rhythm behind the pulpit. After shaking hands and a quick word with the deacons while they locked up the offering, he slid out the side door and went home.

*

Alan set his dinner up on a tray, complete with Karen's fancy dish towel and a vodka, neat. He'd started a new routine out of nothing more than sadness and had learned how to record his sermons each week; he'd watched them while he ate. At first, he

watched them because it seemed the thing to do—a small way to be close to Karen. It devolved into watching them each night and yelling back at the theology he heard spewing from the television. He argued with the exegetical preaching and analogies he used and created a master list of sermons to preach again and another list of clothes that looked terrible on camera. Now, he found every wrong thing with his sermons.

A freezer meal was spinning and popping in the microwave while he changed clothes. He looked up to see the suit hanging that he'd worn to Karen's funeral. Alan ripped the suit and several others down. He snatched the list off the counter as the microwave beeped. He pulled every item of clothing on the list and shoved them into the trash bags it had taken him two weeks to find. He stuffed everything in the trunk of Karen's car and looked for somewhere to dump it. It was then that Alan realized he never went anywhere but the church on Sundays, and he had no idea what was open. His growling stomach urged him to pull into the Dairy Queen parking lot, where he spotted a drop box for donations of clothes.

Alan secured his Butterfinger Blizzard in the cup holder of Karen's car and pulled up beside the drop box. He crammed shopping bags and trash bags full of old suits, ties, and shoes. He noticed dry cleaning hanging on the hook in the backseat and shoved that on top of the bags and pushed it all deeper into the bin, until it was sticking out of the hinged door. He drove off in a triumphant squeal of tires.

Alan got home in time to change clothes for the evening church service. Karen's side of the closet hung neat and organized, and he could smell her in the closet. She'd always been extravagant with buying perfume. His side of the closet revealed a few suits,

khakis, and a rainbow of button-up shirts. He dug down into the hamper and pulled out a bottle of scotch he'd bought last week.

Alan, dressed in a red polo and a pair of khakis, could hear Karen, "Alan, you look like your mother dressed you, get back in the closet and change something."

Easter night service was meant to replicate Jesus' final time with his disciples when they met in the upper room, and He led them through the breaking of bread. Each Easter evening, the church was set up intimately with tables, and the church body did it just like Jesus told them before he left the Earth.

Sunday nights had always been Alan's favorite service of the week; he had the backbone of his church in this group. Alan taught from a small lectern on the floor between the pews. His goal had been to make this service more intimate. Not him preaching at them from the stage, separated from the ones who wanted to hear his teaching. They were the ones that he'd cried in front of when he and Karen announced to the church that her cancer had returned and it was terminal.

*

Alan remembered that he had been at the church when his daughters called after a checkup to tell him that the cancer was back and that she had six to twelve months.

"Dad, meet us at home. It's back."

"What are you talking about? I thought this appointment was just a checkup."

"They had her scan results when we got there. It's everywhere. We are taking her to the lab now for bloodwork."

"But she's been fine. She walks every morning, and she just tried that new color on her hair. She can't be sick."

"Dad, pull it together. Beth and I will be home with her soon, and she doesn't need to know that I called you. Don't tell her you'll find whatever cure she needs just be there."

"Okay. Thank you, Penny. For going with her, I mean. I should have been there."

"It's fine Dad. Just be there for her now."

That day was supposed to be a date on the calendar to be forgotten. The Cancer had spread from her lymph nodes to her bones, and within a few months, it was in her brain. She'd barely made it to the six-month mark. He took the first drink the night Hospice came to care for Karen's personal needs, and he'd learned he couldn't handle it. He was always hurting or frustrating her. The nurses were more gentle, and her daughters helped with dressing her and sat and slept beside her.

Alan tried to find his place in her illness.

Late one night, Karen begged for rainbow sherbet, so he'd gone to the store at midnight, knowing she wouldn't be able to eat it. He walked to the front of the store, and the display of liquor bottles sang to him. He hadn't drunk anything since his teenage days, and yet he couldn't resist picking up the bottle and carrying it straight to the checkout. After a quick look around, Alan hid the bottle in the closet and snuck drinks at night.

At church that night, he had a simple message.

"Church, we need to love one another. It's what Jesus charged us with, told us to do. You've loved my family for years, but that's easy, because I'm charming and handsome. But what about the person who cuts you off in traffic? What about your

mother-in-law? Do you love her the best you can? How about your coworker? It's easy to love the loveable. It's hard to love the people who do bad things to you.

I'm glad to be a part of you all and to lead this body, and there's not a day that goes by I don't thank God for all of you, but we need to do a better job of loving each other." He paused to look around at the group of people listening to him and realized how much they had aged.

"Next time you see Bob Turner at the Garden Center, and he's being his rascally self and talking everybody's ear off—oh, sorry, Bob, I didn't see you back there. Love you, Brother," he'd said with a grin.

My point is that you need to live out the Great Commission. Go out into the world, and as Jesus said, 'they'll know you by the way you love each other.' Go, Love." He pounded these last words out on the corner of the pew."

Alan dismissed them with a prayer and quietly slipped out the side door to go home. Johnny Cash sang about a ring of fire while he opened a can of ravioli and poured himself a drink. He waited for the ding on the microwave as he downed the first and then poured the second drink.

The church ladies had been to the house at some point during the week and cleaned and restocked the fridge and cabinets for him. Karen never bought things like ravioli or anything in a can. Different groups of women had taken care of the house when Karen was first sick, and it hadn't occurred to Alan to stop them. Frankly, it was nice to have a woman's touch in the house and the pleasant smell after they were finished.

Alan balanced the tumbler of vodka, a bowl of ravioli, and the remote on the arms of his chair as he kicked the footrest out. He looked at his socked feet and saw three toes sticking out of a hole.

“Karen, I’ve got a hole in my—.” He realized his mistake and felt like he was suffocating as his lungs betrayed him. He struggled to stand, got his left foot caught in the footrest piece of the recliner, and cut his ankle as it forced its way down through the metal-forked frame. The ravioli launched off the armrest and flipped upside down onto the carpet. The red sauce splattered around the outer ring of the bowl like a sunburst. He stumbled on his right leg as he tried to get his left leg untrapped. As he struggled to pull it loose from the chair, the doorbell rang, startling him, and sent him back onto the sofa table full of framed pictures. With a crash, the frames fell to the floor, and he landed on top of them. A second ding.

“Just a minute,” he managed meekly. Struggling, he got up and crept towards the door.

“Dad, my goodness, what happened, and what’s on your shirt?” Bethany said. “I’m sorry I’m late, but it’s been a busy day, and my dog puked on the floor as I was leaving, and then my GPS took me on a wild goose chase. What happened here, and since when do you like ravioli? Wait, are you drinking? How very un-Baptist of you, Daddy.”

“Good grief, child. One thought at a time, child. Bethany, what are you talking about? I didn’t even know you were coming.”

“Daddy, I left you a voicemail telling you I would be here but that I’d be late because I had to help some friends first. Aren’t you proud of me using my degree to help people?”

“Depends. Who and what did you help with?”

“Doesn’t matter. Hey, let’s clean this up before it gets any worse, and I’m glad to see you, too, Dad.”

“Here’s a rule of thumb for you, Beth. If you have to use a GPS to get home, the home you’ve lived in all of your life, then you live too far away.”

“Maybe so, but I’ve never been good at directions. All the east, west, north business makes no sense to me. Just tell me to turn left and right or before or after Target in my neighborhood.”

“Have I taught you nothing, Bethany.” He looked at her over his glasses.

“Daddy, you realize this red is not going to come out of momma’s carpet.”

“The church women brought it over.”

"Sure, but if that was liquor, I'll drive, and I'll even let you take me to Dairy Queen."

"It was just water, Bethany. Let’s go.

“Daddy, you don’t drink water. Coffee and tea are your two food groups.”

"Bethany, I'm fine, and it's late. If you want to go, we need to hurry before they close."

*

Alan had already conquered a finance committee meeting, a ladies' group meeting, and typed his notes for the deacons meeting—all before lunchtime. He called Beth at home.

“Hello,” she answered sleepily.

“Bethany, I took the rest of the day off, so get up and get dressed and in the car. Your pick for lunch! I’m not eating tofu. Pick something I’ll like too.”

"Okay, Dad. There's a deli at my favorite store, so you can take me shopping after lunch."

"Don't forget to feed the meter; they like to ticket everyone here."

"I know, Dad." Beth said as she dropped the phone back on the cradle.

He pulled his car into the space and saw chickpea hummus with pita listed as the signature dish on the menu board.

"Oh great, I'm going to need a cheeseburger after this place," he mumbled to himself.

"Daddy, I got us a table out here with an umbrella. It's so pretty out today."

Alan hugged her slight frame and pulled her chair out for her. She had always been pretty, and he loved Beth's laugh.

"Thank you for helping me clean up the house last night. Your mother would have killed me."

"Um, let's just say she would have added a little extra hot sauce to your dinner that night," she said as she stole a fry off his plate.

"What? She never did that." His chair scraped across the concrete, causing her to flinch.

"Daddy, you always complained about her cooking. You hated when she made things spicy, so when you irritated her, she would just shake a few drops into your dinner. I saw her do it once, she winked at me as she called you for dinner."

"I miss her cooking."

"I miss all of her, Dad. I miss the way she patted my shoulder when she hugged me or how she always tucked my hair behind my ear as she talked to me—it drove me crazy, but now I miss it."

"How's your food?" He shoved ketchup covered fries in his mouth.

"Dad, that's it? You have nothing else to say? I'm trying to talk to you. I lost my mom. I miss her because she's one-half of my parents. And because when I get married, I won't have her there to fix my veil or my earrings or later, kiss my babies."

"Bethany, I don't know what you want from me. I can't be Mom for you." Alan said as lowered his head.

"Dad, I'm not trying to make you her," she whispered as she noticed people watching them. "I'm just trying to get you to understand that yes, you lost your wife, but Penny and I—we lost our mother."

"So Penny is upset with me?"

"I didn't say that, but yes, she's angry that you aren't taking care of things."

"Like what? Do you think that, Beth?"

"Look around the house, around Momma's house. It hurts me to see you hurting, but it makes me angry to think that you are selfish. You haven't reached out to us, not even to me. Not really. And when I talked about her, you just dismissed it. I'm not okay, I miss her, and you just keep going like nothing has happened to our family. And now you are drinking? When did that start?" She tossed her napkin in her seat and stood up.

"Lower your voice, Bethany, and don't cause a scene."

"Of course, Daddy. Somebody from the church might see your daughter acting up and ruin your perfect image."

“Don’t talk to me that way, Bethany. I don’t deserve that.”

"Everyone is doing everything for you. Look at Mom's garden, it's gone because you haven't taken care of it. Just things like that, things that show you still love her."

“I can’t do it all. Sit down.”

“You are right, but you can do some things. Have you finished her headstone?”

She whispered across the table.

“No, I haven't.” His nostrils flared, and his ears burned bright red.

“I need to leave this evening, so please finish your food.”

*

Alan settled into his recliner with a bottle of Stoli’s after Bethany left.

He was obsessed with watching his sermons. It started as something to do to fill the hours he was home alone. He always looked for his girls, and they were always on the third or fourth pew to his left. He watched his daughters grow up from year to year. There were Christmas Cantatas and Easter plays when his daughters had big roles as the pastors’ daughters. In their defense, they could sing and had a flair for the dramatic. Alan realized from watching the congregation that he had a stable group of people. Each tape revealed most of the same people with varying degrees of balding and hair color changes.

Alan continued to watch the tapes as he drank and tried to find the magic in preaching again. He'd lost it. Alan thought if he kept watching it, he could spot the moment he’d lost it, but instead, it turned into him becoming increasingly drunk and destroying the version of himself he sought after.

He made lists of his sermons, sorting them into categories, sermons about salvation, and mercy, tithing, and the fruit of the spirit. He’d always done the obligatory

sermons on holidays. New Year's gave everyone a new beginning, and the end of the gospels made a great place to start. The disciples were their best selves after Jesus's death and resurrection. Alan preached out of Romans every couple of years to get everyone fired up in their salvation and remind them that they were part of the Biblical Hall of Fame.

A final tape in the box had a funeral that he couldn't recall, he'd always found it odd that families asked for the services to be recorded. As he watched the people speak and the pallbearers stand together, he had no memory of who this person was. Alan watched it over and over, even playing some parts in slow motion. He watched himself in a brown suit with a dark tie stand and speak of this person's life. How could he pastor a church and not recall every funeral? It was a person's death, and he had the honor of speaking over their life, and he couldn't even remember their name. Alan started another list for each funeral he had preached. If he didn't remember the message, he took a shot from the Stoli's bottle.

Alan loaded a tape labeled **He Plans to Prosper You.**

"Mhmm, this should be good. God plans to prosper me."

He pressed play and watched the choir leave the stage as he took the pulpit.

"All right, I know you all have Super Bowl plans, so I'll preach, you'll listen, and figure out how to apply it in your own life, and we will move on. That means I need people nodding in agreement, shouting amen, and raising those hands with a hallelujah. If I don't get it, you'll be watching the Cowboys on the highlight reel."

"You idiot, the Cowboys lost that game by twenty-five points!" He screamed at the television.

Alan turned the volume up as he filled his glass with the clear liquor and took a swig.

“Everyone read this verse with me. It will be on the screen so you people with the King James Version can keep up. ‘For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you.’” He listened to himself read the verse to the congregation.

“You idiot! How can you stand behind that pulpit in that ugly tie? Did you believe it?” Alan threw the glass against the wall and watched it land with shards sticking up out of the carpet. He grabbed a new bottle he’d hidden behind the trash bags. He grabbed his Bible and reprinted the entire sermon about what it means to live a life where God promises a prosperous life to a younger, frozen version of himself on the screen.

“That sermon would have impressed the hell out of them.”

*

The phone's ringing woke him the next morning, and he answered it groggily.

“Hey, Dad, you sound terrible. Are you sick?”

“Penny? No, honey, I’m fine. I overslept. It’s good you called, you woke me up. How are you?” He leaned forward in the recliner, knocking a bowl of melted ice cream over onto the carpet.

“We’re fine, Dad. Listen, the headstone place called me and said they need you to finish the details of Mom’s headstone. They said they’ve reached out to you, but you aren’t returning their phone calls.”

“Oh, I’d meant to do that.” He picked at a piece of loose thread on his chair.

“Dad, you have to get this done. Can you take care of it today so they can get it finished? It’s been six months.”

“I know. I’ll do it. I’ve tried to do it a few times.” Alan rubbed his eyes and looked at Karen’s picture on the wall.

“Dad, it’s hard for all of us. But this is for her. She deserves this. Do you want me to come down to help?”

“No, no, I’ll figure it out and sign all the paperwork,” he said as he stood up and stumbled back to a sitting position.

“Please get it finished and ask for a delivery date, so I can be sure to be there when they install it,” she said quietly.

“If you want to come down,” he looked around the house. “No, never mind. I’ll be fine. You two have already done your part. Bethany was here yesterday.”

“I know,” she told me. “Dad, how about I call Bethany and we plan a trip, or maybe you can fly out here for a few days?”

“Sure, that sounds fun. I need to get moving, or the quilting ladies will have my head. I’m supposed to meet with them this morning.”

“Dad, please call or go to the headstone place today. They’re expecting you. I told them you would be there today.”

“Penny, I thought I was the parent.”

“You are, Dad. Just please get it taken care of and I’ll call you tonight.”

After showering and a trip through the Chick-fil-A, Alan pulled into the Pastor’s parking spot at church. He hated Mondays because they were days of e-mails and phone calls. People disliked things said in a sermon and wanted to complain, or the bread for the

Communion hadn't been fresh enough, or it was too hot or too cold during the service. Families needed extra support with illnesses, injuries, or death. Cleaning crews were busy erasing signs of the Lord's Supper, and the grounds crew chose today to trim all the trees. Alan pushed the door to his office open and nearly knocked the maintenance man off the ladder.

"Chuck, I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were there."

"Sorry, sir. I'm changing your light bulbs and filters."

"It's not your fault. I'm late." Alan tossed everything onto his office chair and grabbed his notepad and pen, nearly knocking Chuck off the ladder a second time as he turned around to race out the door.

"Good morning, ladies, is this considered fashionably late?" Alan asked as he slid into a chair, sloshing coffee on the table and his legal pad.

"Good morning, Pastor. We need your opinion on a few things. And are you aware that your shoes don't match? You have two different colored loafers on your feet."

"Oops, I guess I just lost the part of fashionably—I'm just late. Let's get down to business. I'll take care of my shoes later."

"Maybe you should choose your drinks and shoes a little more carefully."

"I'm sorry, Gale, what was that?"

"Nothing, Pastor. I did want to ask you a question. We've been taking care of things at the house for a while. You know, just to help after Karen's passing. Is that still helpful or would you like us to stop?"

"Oh, well it's been quite helpful. You all have taken better care of me than I deserve."

“I hate to interrupt the two of you, but I have appointments. Can you all handle this later?” asked June.

“Sorry, Miss June. Yes, we can talk later. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. Let's get these details taken care of so you can get on your way.”

*

Alan pulled his car into a parking space at Memorial and Monument Gardens.

“Funny, I don't see a garden.”

He pulled the car into the spot marked for family members and noticed a man in a white shirt watching him through the window.

“I guess there's no changing my mind now.” Alan grabbed his checkbook and slammed his car door. The gravel crunched under his feet and sent little puffs of dust up onto his mismatched loafers.

A noise from the roll-up door on the end of the building startled him as he reached for the front door. Alan pushed the door open with more force than necessary, and it banged against a shelf, startling a cat lying in the chair. The cat stretched and rolled onto his back.

“Hello, anybody around?”

“Just a minute,” a gruff voice yelled from the back.

A bulletin board hung in the entryway with cards pinned to it. Various thank you cards were scattered across the board. A flyer for a pig roast hung from the bottom by a red tack. The acrid smell of the place burned his nose.

“Hey, man, sorry to keep you waiting. I was finishing up a piece, and my office person left early today. What can I help you with?”

“I'm Alan Walker, and I'm here to finish the paperwork for my wife's monument. Someone called my daughter about it this morning.”

“Oh, okay. Well, let's sit down and figure out what we need to do, I just need to wash my hands. Why don't you give me a minute to find your paperwork? Meet our cat, Clyde. He likes his neck rubbed, but if you go for the belly, he'll attack your hand.”

“Well, hello there, Clyde, I guess we can sit and visit.” He reached out to pet Clyde as the cat chomped down on his fingers and drew blood.

“All right, Mr. Walker, it looks like you two picked out a joint stone. We have it mostly finished, but needed the date of death. There is also the manner of the rest of the balance that her life insurance didn't cover.”

“Okay.” Clyde said as he chewed his thumbnail.

“I understand this takes time. There is no hurry. She still has her small grave marker. Also, we offer something called a monument care package you may want to consider.”

“What is that for?” Alan said as he kicked at the cat as it attacked the tassel on his loafer.

“Our company will set regular dates to go and care for the stone. This is a time-consuming thing and takes a bit of skill to preserve them.”

“No, thank you. If anyone is going to clean the stone above my wife's dead body, it will be me.” He shoved the pamphlet back with a screech of the chair legs. The cat jumped and knocked the plant off its stand.

“I'm sorry, I just wanted you to know that it was available and it's a way we continue to serve the people who trusted us to represent their life.”

“Great. Give me the bill so I can get out of here.”

He signed the final paperwork, wrote the last check for Karen’s life, and kicked the cat as he pushed open the door.

“All right, girls. It’s finished. I let her completely die. I’ve let her die all over again.” The headstone was the last step. He mumbled to himself. Alan started the car and flung gravel across the lot against the cars as he sped out of the lot and onto the highway. He turned the car towards the church, but the lights at the liquor store flashed as a welcome sign.

“Hey, buddy. We’ve got a new brand of scotch you haven’t tried; came in today and I haven’t unpacked it. Want me to grab a bottle for ya?”

“No, just this, thanks. Keep the change.” He threw a crumpled twenty across the counter and exited the store.

Alan had not returned to Karen’s grave, the thought of pulling away from here and leaving Karen here had been more than he could handle. The sun was shining, and the birds were chirping around him as though life had just moved on. As he pulled up to her spot, he noticed the little silver sign had fallen over and the letters had fallen out, “so much for the maintenance package.” The ground had settled over her grave, and a few sprigs of grass had poked through the soil. She was the only new grave in her section. He looked around for fellow mourners and lifted the bottle to his lips and chugged until it burned. He sat down directly on her grave with the bottle between his legs. He bounced the screw-on lid against the headstone opposite Karen’s. The cap made a dull thud and fell flat. He did it again and again until his arm ached.

“You are such a fool, Alan Walker. You preach to people every weekend about God’s goodness and strength. And here you are on your dead wife’s grave chugging liquor out of a brown bag.”

Alan took another drink, longer this time, it didn’t burn so much. The car was still running, and he could hear NPR on the radio and his phone ringing from the cup holder.

“I’m probably late for another committee meeting. Hey, Karen, remember what we used to say about committees? If we were ever going to die, we’d find a committee meeting to sit through because they move so slow and you feel like you’d live forever?”

The birds chirped in response.

“I’m lost without you. I don’t know how to dress myself. I have no idea when my physical is or where my gardening shoes took off to. I’m miserable. Karen, I ruined your carpet with ravioli sauce. I’m sorry.”

“I’m so lost.” He tipped the bottle up.

“I haven’t finished your thank you notes yet. The girls wrote them out, but they said I needed to sign them too.”

Alan dragged himself back to the car and thought he would finish things he’d neglected for Karen. His stomach growled and heaved and urged him to veer off at the nearest drive-thru.

“Please order when ready.”

“Yes, I’d like a spicy deluxe sandwich, please. And a large lemonade.”

“I’m sorry, sir, can you repeat that? I’m having a hard time understanding you.”

“Yes, I want a spicy chicken sandwich and a large lemonade.”

“A spicy sandwich and lemonade? Will that be regular or large?”

“Deeeeluxe, please.”

“Yes sir, we will have your total at the window. Please pull up.”

“How much do I owe you? Here, see if you can catch it.” He wadded a ten-dollar bill and threw it at the cashier as she ducked.

“Oh, don’t be a chicken, it won’t hurt you.” He’d said as he laughed at her, slapping the steering wheel.

She found the wadded cash and handed him his change and his order.

“I told you I wanted the large lemonade,” he spewed at her. “I told you twice I wanted a large lemonade.”

“I’m sorry, please allow me to get that for you.”

“Never mind. I’m leaving.”

He grabbed the bag out of the cashier’s hand, and as he hit the gas, a woman jumped out of the path of his car.

Alan sat waiting for the light to turn green and poured the rest of a bottle from the console into his lemonade. He stuck the straw down through the plastic hole as horns blared behind him. Alan looked up to see the green light.

“People are pushy. Just calm down, everybody. I’ve got lots to do today. Back to the church. I ordered Karen’s headstone. I’ll tell them I did it, that they got their way, and I put ‘beloved mother and wife’ on it.”

He failed to navigate the next set of red lights. When the police lights filled his rearview mirror, he ignored it—even when they engaged the siren. He kept driving.

“Aw, screw ‘em. They can go around. It’s a four-lane road.” He pulled into the church parking lot and stumbled out of the car with his cup as the police car pulled in behind him.

“Alan, stop where you are. We need to talk to you, now.”

“Jason, how are you, son? What can you possibly want with me?”

“Alan, you can’t be serious. Somebody called us from the restaurant. You were rude to the employees and almost ran over your church secretary. Did you even realize it was her? What’s in your cup?”

“Lemonade,” Alan said with a grin.

“You know this isn’t right. Give me the cup.”

“Jason, I liked you when you and Penny dated, what. What happened? Why'd she dump you?”

“Alan, let’s keep this about you right now.”

“Okay, look, I've drunk a little,” he chuckled.

“This is not a joke, Alan,” he reached out to grab his hand, but missed as Alan spun away from him.

“Don’t touch me. Look, it’s been a bad day,” he said as he sat down on the trunk of his car.

“A bad day doesn’t justify driving under the influence, nearly hitting a pedestrian, and harassing people at a restaurant.”

“You're right, and I'm sorry. I need to go to the church and finish up a few things, so can I go?”

“Alan, you aren't going anywhere. I've never seen you like this. What's going on with you? Since when do you drink?”

“It's been a bad year.”

“Yes, so you've said. Where's Beth? Is she still in town? Someone needs to get your car. You can call her when we get to the police station.”

“I'm not going anywhere, Jason, but to the church and then home.”

“No, you aren't. Have you ever been given a field sobriety test?”

“No, what do I need to do to make you go away? Hey, here comes Nancy. “Hey, Nancy, can you call Penny and tell her that her ex-boyfriend won't leave me alone, and he is threatening me,” he said as he stepped towards her and tripped over the parking divider.

“I've already called them, Alan. Bethany is on her way, and Penny will be here tomorrow,” she said as she crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the ground.

“Nancy, can you call my dad and have him come get Pastor's car and drive it to his house?,” he said as he reached for a set of handcuffs and started towards Alan.

“Jason, when you've buried a wife, and your daughters don't come home, then come lecture and arrest me,” Alan yelled, as he turned and pulled his arm loose from Jason's grip. He fell to the ground, hitting his face on the pavement and causing blood to splatter. He crawled to his knees and, with a loud groan, collapsed under his own weight.

“It's time to give it up, Alan, we all know you are hurting and that you need help. It's time. Get up, I'm taking you to the hospital,” Jason said as he reached down and grabbed the old man by his arm, and pulled him to a standing position.

“I'm sorry,” Alan said, as he wiped blood out of his eyes.

“Nancy, there is a first aid kit in my car, stay with him, and I'll get him cleaned up. Can I trust you not to try to run off again?”

“I couldn't run if I tried," Alan replied, as he leaned against the cruiser, handcuffed.

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